

Stanoff: Buying Indian, supporting us all

By Tracy Stanhoff
Story Published: Jul 6, 2009
Story Updated: Jul 6, 2009

Our frustrating Indian politics are derailing one of the greatest economic opportunities in the history of Indian country, the ability to parlay our success in tribal government gaming into a sustainable, diverse, prosperous Indian business community.

I have been blessed, and with more than two decades of persistent, hard work my business has obtained work from the nation's most progressive associations, tribes, tribal enterprises and other American Indian businesses.

I have been honored to lead my tribe, the [Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation](#), as tribal chairwoman in our quest for true tribal gaming economic self-sufficiency, by transitioning our casino from non-Native corporate management to our own tribal corporate management through the creation of the [Prairie Band Potawatomi Entertainment Corporation](#).

As an aside, I have also been able to interact on another level with Corporate America, participating on many community boards where we are integrated with the presidents and CEOs of major multi-billion dollar corporations.

So I can say that I have sat on "both sides of the table" as a tribal leader contracting for products and services, and as a business owner seeking work. I have also witnessed how others keep themselves economically healthy by circulating their money back to their own communities.

The two largest and most esteemed national American Indian fraternal organizations, the [National Congress of American Indians](#) and the [National Indian Gaming Association](#), get it. They incorporate American Indian business usage into their organization's supplier base.

One can argue that NCAI and NIGA could do more, but I know that they believe in our people and rotate projects around to qualified American Indians.

And, the cry for using our own businesses has been shouted by our top-most leaders and the rhetoric to use our businesses is discussed at most every major Indian gathering. A Native businessperson even trademarked the phrase, "Buy Native."

So it goes. Many attempts to formally organize campaigns to use American Indian businesses have been dismal and politically exclusive.

NIGA's noble attempt, the American Indian Business Network, has been a failure for the most part. In my opinion, the present AIBN leadership (all on this board are wonderful people) has been selected to almost exclude our most grass-roots

and effective business associations in Indian country, the American Indian Chambers of Commerce.

One good point about AIBN is that at NIGA's events there is an American Indian business presence. But has that really worked? Are we truly embraced? I guess something is better than nothing – and know I am rooting for you all. And, NIGA itself does use Indian businesses.

So instead of whining, pontificating and crying any more about the situation, here are my proposed solutions to this issue.

Each tribe and tribal enterprise should incorporate a "Buy Native" policy. As a matter of fact, wouldn't it be great if we could get a policy included in each tribe's state gaming compact or even the National Indian Gaming Commission's regulations. Incorporating the policy into a compact or NIGC regulations would legally solidify the effort. Let's start lobbying for this.

Stop talking and "just do it," by participating in your local American Indian Chamber of Commerce or Indian business association. One way to bridge the gap is to build one-on-one relationships between our business owners and those who procure for tribes and tribal enterprises. Monthly Chamber of Commerce meetings provide a consistent vehicle for this interaction.

Find and source American Indian businesses through reputable organizations such as our American Indian Chambers of Commerce. The Chambers know who is capable and really an American Indian-owned business, not a front for a majority-owned firm.

When an American Indian-owned business loses a bid opportunity, debrief the business on what was lacking in their bid. This debriefing process is two-fold. First, it communicates to the business owner where we can do better. Secondly, it holds the procurement agent accountable for their decision.

Remove barriers; struggle within ourselves to learn that we can hire other Indians to do the job. I cannot understand why we continue to give more money and leeway to non-Native firms and hold our Native businesses under such strict rules that we are bound to fail.

I cannot tell you how many times we have been told we are too small, lack experience, or are not qualified. If we are good enough to do business with non-Native companies larger than our own casinos then we can certainly do the job. Start smaller businesses with smaller jobs to mentor and position them for growth.

Truly understand that we as American Indians, own our tribal enterprises and casinos. We are the "boss" and should act like one. If we tell our non-Native

employees and partners to hire Natives then that is what rules. We treat our employees with great respect and provide outstanding salaries with benefits. We should be able to professionally enforce a “Buy Native” policy.

Stop buying only from vendors locally or “Las Vegas.” Why is it that this buy local policy overpowers buying from Natives? And, “Las Vegas” continues to not support tribal government gaming on many fronts. The spirit of the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act was to assist all Indians in our quest for economic self-sufficiency.

There are many other great ideas to implement “Buy Native.” In our Chamber, we welcome the discussion. The goals are simply to get business back to our own – and there is plenty of business for us all. It is very simple: Keep more of our money in Indian country. Be open-minded, overcome petty politics, stop the rhetoric and just “[Buy Native!](#)”

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